

Round Barns Never Really Became Popular

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Round barns date back to the 18th and early 19th century. George Washington designed and built a sixteen-sided threshing barn at his Dogue Run Farm in Fairfax County, Virginia 1793. The first genuinely round barn in North America was constructed in 1826 at Hancock Shaker Village. A few other round barns appeared on the American landscape before the Civil War.

Despite considerable publicity of the 1826 Shaker barn, the design did not become popular until the 1880s, when some agricultural colleges began to push the design as they taught progressive farming methods based on the principles of industrial efficiency. Round barns were the most popular in the United States between 1880 and 1920, especially in the Midwest.

Benton Steele built several round barns in Indiana. In 1902, Mr. Steele's advertisements for building round barns caught the attention of Professor C. B. Dorsey of the University of Illinois Agricultural Experiment Station. Professor Dorsey traveled to Indiana to view the barns Steele and his associates built.

By 1908, Professor Dorsey's interest in round barns had caught the eye of his University of Illinois colleague Wilber J. Fraser. Mr. Fraser was from Plainfield, Illinois, and graduated from the University of Illinois with the Class of 1893.

Mr. Fraser was the first head of the Department of Dairy Husbandry from 1902 until 1913. He also strongly advocated the round barn, which he said offered the "economy of consideration, low maintenance, and labor efficiency." Mr. Fraser also asserted that round barns could withstand Midwest windstorms better.

The University of Illinois built three round barns south of the main campus. These barns were erected in 1908, 1910, and 1913. The first barn had a cost of \$3,200 in 1908. This price would be equivalent to \$106,946 in today's dollars. The third barn had a cost of \$11,000 in 1913. This price would be equal to \$334,173 in today's dollars.

In February of 1910, the University of Illinois Agricultural Experiment Station published Bulletin No. 143 titled ***Economy of the Round Dairy Barn*** by Wilber J. Fraser. This 45-page booklet extolled the virtues of round versus rectangular dairy barns.

Mr. Frazier also wrote a newspaper article about the advantages of round barns. This article was published in many different Midwestern newspapers. The Fairbury Blade published a copy of his article in the October 24, 1913 issue.

At least three round barns are known to be built in the Fairbury area. The first round barn built in the Fairbury area was built in 1912 by Chris Gerber (1888-1971). In 1912, Chris Gerber was a 24-year-old farmer. Chris built a new barn on his farm eight miles south of Fairbury. Rather than making the traditional rectangular framed barn, Chris used the latest round barn technology. Chris's barn was 70 feet in diameter and 20 feet to the eaves. It was also equipped with a 12-foot by 42-foot silo in the center of the barn. Unfortunately, the unique round barn Chris built burned down in March 1957.

A 1915 Pantagraph article reported three round barns south of Fairbury, including Chris Gerber's round barn. In 1912, Mr. C. L. Fitzgerald and a carpenter built a 52-foot diameter round barn with 16 feet to the eaves. His farm was 10 miles southwest of Fairbury and five miles west of Chris Gerber's round barn. Mr. Fitzgerald reported that he liked operating his round barn but would not build another one because it was too hard to construct.

Another 1915 Pantagraph article reported that Mr. D. O. Travis built a 50-foot-diameter round barn close to Mr. Fitzgerald's farm. The Travis barn was built in 1914.

Another round barn was built on the west side of Champaign around 1914. The Round Barn Restaurant was a popular and fascinating place to dine for many years. A Famous Dave's barbeque franchise was the last business to operate in the old round barn. This barn has been sitting vacant for more than ten years. The current owners are trying to find someone to run a new business in this round barn.

Matthias Jacobsen Diemer (1877-1952) was born in Union Township in Livingston County. Jacob C. Diemer (1846-1926) and Gede Maria Petersen (1854-1924) were his parents. Both of Matthias's parents were born in Denmark.

Matthias J. Diemer attended Pontiac schools. Mr. Diemer never married and farmed for about 40 years south of Pontiac. Mr. Diemer saw the round barn built in West Champaign and decided to create one on his farm. In 1918, Mr. Diemer hired Emmanuel McCoy Sr. and his brother, Clinton, to construct a barn similar to what later became The Round Barn restaurant in Champaign.

This barn was built south of the Pontiac Correctional Center in 1919. This round barn had a 54-foot diameter and originally had cedar shingles. In 1982, the Illinois State Historical Society took on an initiative to have round barns added to the National Register of Historic Places. Round barn enthusiast H. Wayne Price was the chairman of the "Save Our Barns Committee" of the Illinois State Historical Society. He determined there were 55 round barns still standing in the State of Illinois. Mr. Price and two Illinois State Historic Preservation Office representatives determined that seven of these 55 barns met the proper criteria to be added to the National Register of Historic Places. One of the seven round barns selected was the Raymond Schultz round barn built by Matthias J. Diemer. The application to add these seven round barns to the National Register was approved in 1982, and property number 82002582 was assigned to this collection of seven round barns.

The application to add these seven round barns to the National Register noted that the most extensive round barns ever built in Illinois had 100-foot diameters and 80-foot heights. The application also stated the Schultz barn was one of the last round barns built in Illinois.

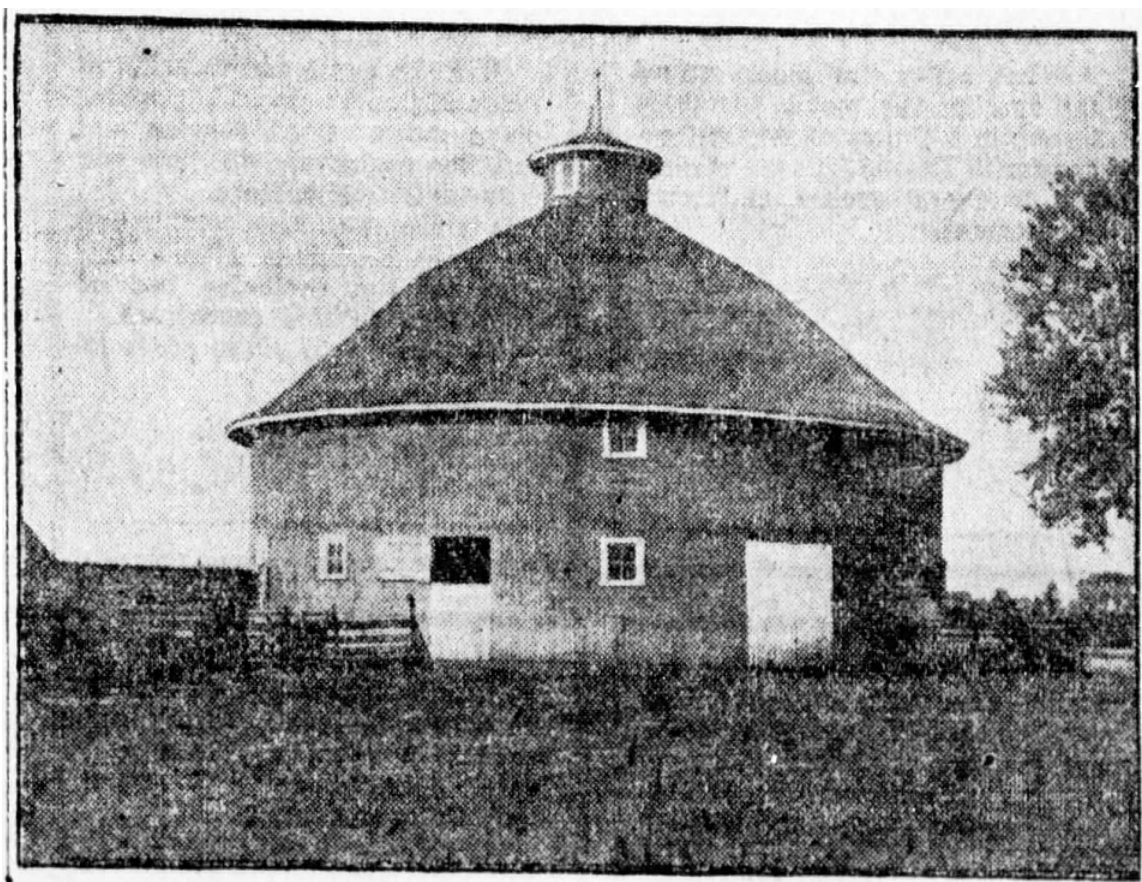
A 1984 Pantagraph article about the Schultz round barn reported that Mr. Diemer willed the round barn and the surrounding 81.54 acres to the Moody Bible Institute in 1952. Raymond and Betty Schultz bought the round barn and the farm from the Moody Bible Institute in 1955. They reported the round barn was in excellent condition when they bought it.

Although the University of Illinois heavily pushed the round barn design, it never became popular. There were several reasons why they did not become the predominant barn design in Illinois. Traditionally, a farmer's neighbors would help him build a conventional rectangular post and beam-type barn in a few days. Because people were unfamiliar with the building techniques required to create a round barn, a farmer and his neighbors would struggle to build the more complicated design.

Carpenters were also used to the construction of conventional rectangular barns. They resisted building round barns because they would likely lose money until they went through the "Learning Curve" and became proficient at making them.

Farmers started to use electricity in the 1920s. Most farms received electricity in the 1930s during the Great Depression as part of the federal government Rural Electrification Administration program. Electrified dairy equipment was then designed for rectangular barns because they were the predominant type of barn design.

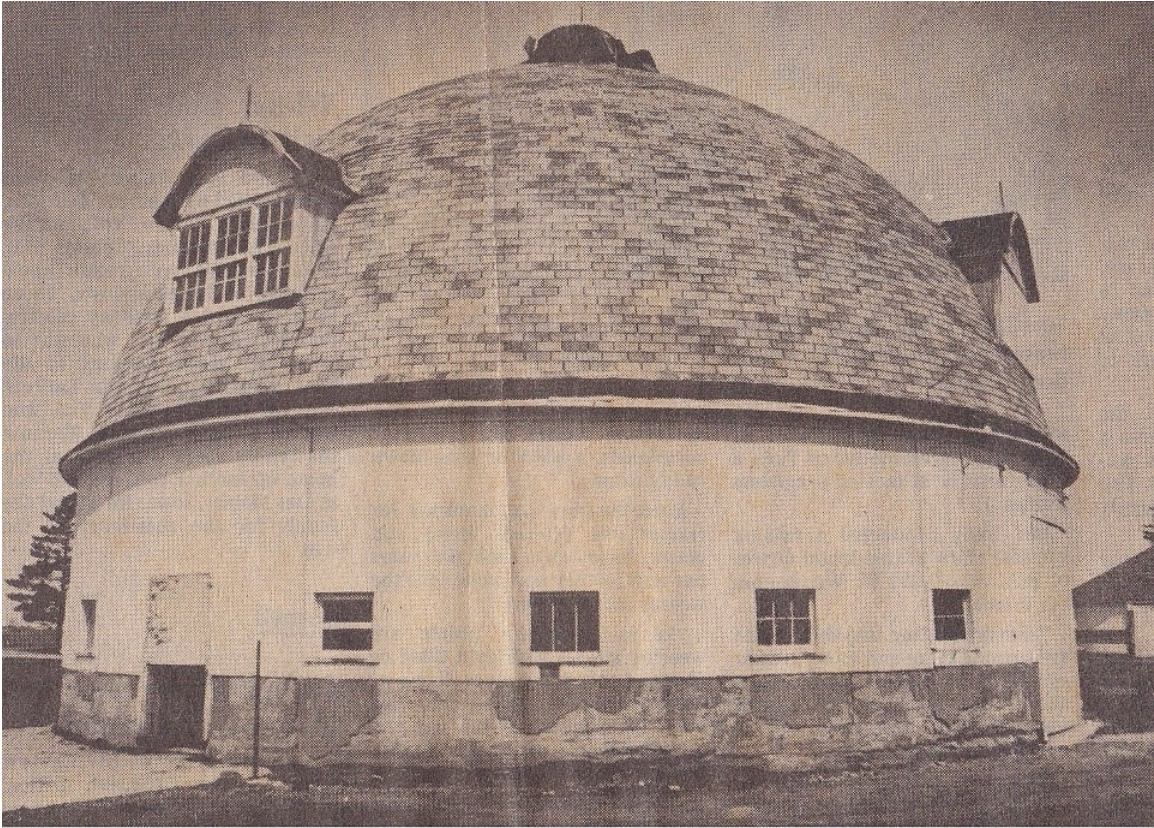
The few remaining round barns in Illinois are very interesting to view compared to the conventional rectangular barns. The number of these round barns still standing declines yearly as Mother Nature takes its toll on these wooden structures.



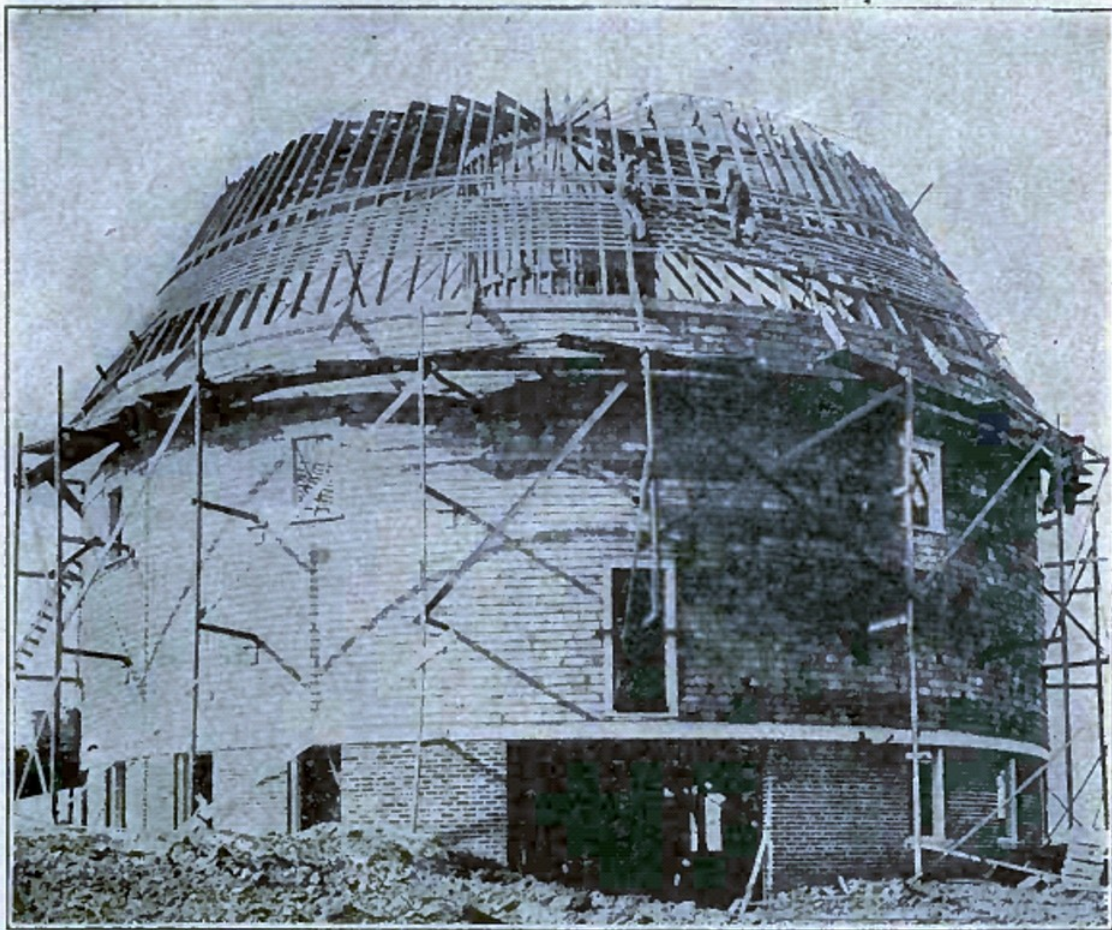
June 1915 photograph of the 52 foot diameter round barn on the C. L. Fitzgerald farm southwest of Fairbury.



1976 photograph of the Round Barn Restaurant in Champaign, Illinois.



1984 photograph of the Raymond and Betty Schultz round barn south of the Pontiac Correctional Center.



One of the three round barns at the University of Illinois under construction from the 1910 Bulletin No. 143 ***Economy of the Round Dairy Barn*** by Wilbur J. Fraser.